



LOVING THE CHURCH FOR THE SAKE OF JUSTICE AN OPEN LETTER TO DR. RONALD J. SIDER

“Historic biblical faith understood the church as a new community. The basic New Testament images of the church are of the body of Christ, the people of God, and the family of God. All these stress the fact that we’re talking about a new community—a new, visible social order. That new community in the New Testament was living so differently from the world that people would say, ‘Wow, what’s going on here?’”
— Ron Sider, in a 1995 interview with Stan Guthrie, *Christianity Today*

Dear Ron,
Because I will not be present at your retirement gala in July, I want to take time to thank you personally, publicly, and on behalf of my congregation, for your 50-plus years of prophetic service, to which the American church is deeply indebted (whether or not all realize it).

Pastors like mine, the late Rev. Bob Appleby, were much in need of outside encouragement amid the frenzied culture of 1970s-era evangelicalism. Our roots as a congregation began in a large, Chi-

nese Presbyterian congregation in San Francisco’s Chinatown at a time when “Evangelism Explosion” was all the rage, and churches were aggressively handing out tickets for God in the form of neatly packaged, soul-saving propositions. For Appleby and his colleagues, moving from an understanding of the gospel as personal “fire insurance” to one that subversively confronted the existing social order was a lonely endeavor.

For this reason, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* represented the kind of voice in the wilderness that Appleby needed for assurance that he wasn’t crazy or, if he was, at least he wasn’t alone.

Your work violently broke the anesthetizing silence of the status quo, making way for much-needed, albeit messy, conversation among Christians about moral non-neutrality of economic systems.

Your message deeply resonated with other rare, prophetic voices captured in writings important in our congregational formation: for example, *The Kingdom of God* by John Bright (biblical scholar, Union Theological Seminary), *Incendiary Fellowship* by Elton Trueblood (Quaker theologian philosopher), and *Joy to the World* by Robert Henderson (pastor, Presbyterian Church USA), among others. These voices together helped us to keep believing that being the church was inherent to, not separate from, the saving work of the cross. Put another way, true salvation gives rise to a peculiar, sociologically unpredictable people.

The notion of an alternative community has been at work on us for many years, stemming from Appleby’s early musings as a young, budding Christian leader during the civil rights movement in East Palo Alto, Calif. In the late ‘50s, racial demographics in East Palo Alto underwent rapid change as many postwar African Americans resettled in suburbs outside of San Francisco. Appleby was deeply troubled by the prejudice of the Anglo churches toward their new black neighbors. He was also troubled by evan-

gelical resistance to, or passivity about, the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. So he ran to his Bible in search of answers. What does the New Testament church look like, and why doesn’t the prevailing evangelical church look much like it?

That the biblical gospel shatters racial, economic, and social barriers of every kind, knitting together a community submitted to one another in love is, of course, quite threatening to radical individualism, an American idol you have been faithful in calling out. Appleby used to constantly remind us that “niceness is not a fruit of the Holy Spirit.” Your insistence on preaching the unpopular word has been an inspiration to us all. The ecclesial firestorm following *Rich Christians*, culminating in the release of *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators* (David Chilton, 1981), is the stuff of legends. Your work violently broke the anesthetizing silence of the status quo, making way for much-needed, albeit messy, conversation among Christians about moral non-neutrality of economic systems. Some 33 years later, the exchange remains messy, but know that were it not for prophets like you, we might not be having the conversation at all.

The last time I saw you in person, Ron, we were singing hymns, glorifying Christ among a choir of many denominations and colors. Huddled together on a cold, wintry afternoon in

our nation’s capital, we affirmed the peace of Christ with one another, gave words to the just and compassionate reign of Christ, prayed for our congressional leaders, and called for laws that would not benefit the wealthiest at the expense of the poor. We were then arrested and carted off, our wrists tied behind our backs, and brought to a holding pen where we continued the heavenly chorus. I recall this memory of you fondly, because it beautifully captures the person you are—a disciple of Jesus Christ who loves the church for the sake of justice.

Sincerely,
Craig Wong
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Craig Wong is the executive director of Grace Urban Ministries in San Francisco.